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## Defining Christ. The Church of the East and Nascent Islam

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## ABSTRACT

The response of the seventh-century catholicos of the Syriac Church of the East to nascent Islam is the central theme of this dissertation, focussing on Christological questions with regard to Christ's divinity and humanity, especially the question of to what extent Christ has to be defined as divine or human. In the struggle of various rival Christian groupings to establish the right answer, the Church of the East emphasized the integrity of each of the two natures (the 'Dyophysites') and opposed those who rather emphasized one nature after the union (the 'Miaphysites'). As there were many aspects and nuances in the Christological discussion, further (sub)groupings can be identified, whose positions and alliances might change over time. Even within their own ranks dissenting views flourished. In the statements of the Qur'an, which were compiled after c. 610 and found an already highly standardised form around the middle of the seventh century, the humanity and special role of Christ were acknowledged. However, the Qur'an strongly denied his divinity, but without the further abstract argumentation and complex terminology which marked the debates among Christian theologians.

Most attention is given to Isho'yahb III, who was the highest church leader (catholicos) of the Church of the East from c.649 to 659 and whose 106 letters cover a period from before 628 until his last years. Not only his Christology but also the many challenges he faced are described as they shed more light on his attempts to defend both his Christology and his position against various opponents in a rapidly changing world. Unfortunately, an exact reconstruction of the period is difficult, due to conflicting and possibly biased reports that often were produced in later times.

My new translation of Isho'yahb III's letters which underlies this dissertation, in combination with a tentative reconstruction of contemporaneous events, leads to several new suggestions. The description of the situation of the catholicos after Isho'yahb III until the end of the seventh century sheds further light on the question of how far Isho'yahb III's situation may have been exceptional or in agreement with a broader development during nascent Islam (ending c.692). For a better understanding of Isho'yahb III's letters, a description of the historical and theological background until the year 612 has been provided.

The main new suggestions put forward in this dissertation are as follows:

1. The dissertation offers a further reason for the official addition in 612 of 'two *qnome*' to the older Christological formula ('two natures in one *person*') of the Church of the East.

Among Syriac speaking Christians, the term *qnoma* (plural *qnome*) had played an important and sometimes confusing role in the Christological debates as it could be interpreted in various and even conflicting ways. In theology, it rendered the Greek term *hypostasis*, which traditionally denoted the three divine persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) of the one God. However, when the term also started to be applied to Christ, confusion and misunderstanding grew. An influential Byzantine definition (451) according to which the two natures ‘came together in the one *person* and *hypostasis* of Christ’ was an especial cause of opposing conclusions. Roughly speaking, most Byzantines interpreted the term *hypostasis* as an equivalent of the one *person*, while Miaphysites interpreted it as Christ’s two natures becoming one nature. An important stream within the Church of the East held rather that each nature had its own (individual) *qnoma*. In reaction now to defenders of the one *qnoma* solutions the Church eventually declared in 612 that Christ has two *qnome*. This dissertation argues that the need for this new formula may moreover have been deepened by mystic-ascetical traditions which Babai the Great had modified. Babai (d. 628) was the abbot of a famous reform monastery who had strongly influenced the argumentation for the two *qnome* solution. He also wrote on monastic asceticism and its special contribution can be seen in Babai’s description of the way to attain a mystical revelation of God. Each ascetic monk had to clean his soul like a mirror in order to reflect the light of God, whereby the individual soul was closely associated with the concept of *qnoma*. Because Christ the man was moreover the supreme model, the notion of a full human *qnoma* in Christ next to his divine *qnoma* would have been required.

2. This dissertation analyses how Isho‘yahb III applied the term *qnoma*, and shows that he often used it in a Christological sense, not in a Trinitarian context, and in a few instances in a mystic way similar to Babai. Soteriology (the doctrines concerning the salvation of believers) seems to have played a major role in Isho‘yahb III’s defence of the two *qnome*, especially of the human *qnoma*. The concept of *qnoma* may even have enabled him to make ambiguous statements concerning the divine nature of Christ. Isho‘yahb III’s letters concerning the Christology of his rival Sahdona, who defended one *qnoma* in Christ, centred on the right translation of *qnoma*. Making use of an old tradition (perhaps going back to Ephrem), Babai, Isho‘yahb II, Isho‘yahb III and George I held that both the divine and human natures required their own true *qnoma* in order to denote the full reality of each nature. Sahdona and others argued in turn that the reality of the one Christ implied one *qnoma*.

3. Concerning the definitions of Christ, Babai acknowledged the traditional equation ‘Christ is God’ but rejected ‘God is Christ’, because this would deny the difference between

God the Word and Christ the man. Isho'yahb III recognized the two natures, but he often remained vague about Christ's divinity and hardly brought up Christ's relation with the Trinity. He spoke only incidentally of Christ as God, but did not use the expression 'Son of God'. He strongly rejected Theopaschism (a doctrine ascribing suffering to God), which was an old accusation of the Church of the East against Miaphysites and which was also rejected by Islam. Isho'yahb III even used this argument to disqualify the Miaphysites in the eyes of the Islamic Arabs. This gives the impression that he avoided writing in more specific terms about those aspects of the relation between God and Christ that were rejected by Islamic Arabs, unless he shared their views. However, he defended Christ's divinity more clearly in his last letter, probably after he was exiled by a new governor. Isho'yahb III's successor George I (661-80) may further have responded to the accusation in the Qur'an that Christians would say 'God is Christ'. He explained that it is only one part of the Trinity, God the Word, who was united in one *parsopa* with Christ. George I further placed more emphasis on the one nature of the divinity while connecting the three divine *qnome* with the names of the divinity. This explanation may have found some acceptance among Muslims and George I may therefore have felt more freedom in referring to the Trinity than had Isho'yahb III.

4. Both Isho'yahb III and George I seem to have sought expressions that might be acceptable both to their fellow Christians and to Muslims, although George claimed that Abraham was the father only of the nations that are raised in Christianity. As with most of his predecessors, Catholicos Henanisho' I (ordained 685) condemned the Jews who denied that Jesus should be known as God, but he probably also covertly criticized the increasingly proclaimed Islamic doctrine when he spoke of the 'new folly' of those who claimed that he is only a prophet.

5. The Church of the East reacted to the attempts of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (610-41) at doctrinal reconciliation across different Christian groupings with discussion on the number of wills and energies in Christ. Isho'yahb II's (628-45) formulations remained ambiguous. This was also the case with Isho'yahb III, who recognized two energies in Christ and possibly in a covert manner hinted at only one will. Referring to the two natures, George seems to have acknowledged only one energy.

6. This dissertation also highlights the role of the predominantly Christian Arab vassal kingdom of Hira (in present southern Iraq) preceding and during the conquests, and suggests that the Church of the East tended to continue its centuries-old relation with Hira. Tribes associated with Hira (whose role may have been taken up later by the Shi'ites centred on the nearby new military encampment of Kufa) were rivals with other groupings, such as those

headed by the Umayyads (descendants of a powerful grouping of the Meccan Quraysh) who operated from western Damascus.

7. During the first decades after the first conquests, there seem to have been some short-lived divisions of lands among fluctuating Arab tribes. The Tigris may have formed a natural border between the territories of different dominant Arab groupings, possibly until 641/42. The letters further provide slight indications that the Church of the East might have been involved, at least passively, in negotiations between such groupings.

8. In contrast to what is generally thought, Isho'yahb III probably was still bishop of Nineveh when a decisive conquest took place around 641/42. Here, he must have encountered various Arab groupings in leading positions, many of whom supported the Miaphysites. Some groupings already lived in the vicinity for a long time, but others may have belonged to the (Miaphysite) Arab troops of Heraclius who conquered Persian territory up to Nineveh in 627/28 and stayed there until 636. The new Arab conquests brought in other Arab troops. These various groupings could adhere to different forms of Christianity or to branches of the new religious movement. Initially, the situation may have been fluid and Bishop Isho'yahb III loosely distinguished Arabs (*Tayyaye*) in general (who could have been Christian), from Arabs associated with nascent Islam. He knew that the latter were already powerful and rejected Theopaschism, and he felt therefore confident that they could be persuaded to support his Church against Miaphysites.

9. The rivalry between Umayyad and Kufan groupings may also have accompanied the ecclesiastic rivalry which already existed between western Nisibis, which tended more towards Miaphysitism, and the eastern region where the Eastern Church was most present. If this was the case, Isho'yahb III may have allied more with the Shi'ites. His rivalry with Sahdona, who was involved in Nisibis' condemnation of Isho'yahb III, could also be seen from this perspective. The rivalry between Isho'yahb III and Sahdona was probably not limited to Christology only: both may have aspired to the position of Catholicos, and Sahdona sometimes seems to be the hidden instigator behind attacks on Isho'yahb III.

10. A pattern can be distinguished in which each rival Arab grouping may have sought the cooperation of a different rival Christian leader while rewarding him with the catholicate when it felt able to do so. The cooperation of Church leaders might have been important for the diverse Arab groups as it might have facilitated control over the large Christian communities, including the collection of tax revenues. In turn, it may have been challenging for both the higher clergy and those Persian aristocrats who played pivotal roles within the Church to estimate with which Arab party they might best associate, if they had the option.

The letters of Isho'yahb III offer indications that divergent choices for or against the competing Arab groupings may have led to further uncertainties and conflicts within the Church. The suggested pattern is further supported by the fact that the election of Isho'yahb III's successor, George I, which took place towards the end of the first civil war (656-61), was challenged by two Persian aristocrats. One came from Nisibis and the other from Basra, which was home to a third party involved in this war. The local character of the 676 Synod under George I may further be explained by its belonging currently to territory of one of the competing Arab parties. Another indication is the fate of Catholicos Henanisho' I, who was dismissed after the Umayyads regained control in 692/93, and replaced by the Bishop of Nisibis who had collaborated with them.

11. As Catholicos, Isho'yahb III tried to prevent the pursuit of independence among dioceses around the Gulf while at the same time defending Arab rule. He argued that Arabs respected and protected the Church, and he even considered it appropriate to such respect that Christians had to pay ruling Arabs the half of their possessions in order to keep their faith. He moreover argued that submission to God implied submission to the Arabs as God-given secular leaders, but that God's spiritual power could be transmitted only through his Church. The rebellion in the dioceses around the Persian Gulf was possibly also connected to the conflict between parties associated with Kufa, Basra, or the Umayyads.

12. An important element of the exegesis of the Church of the East was its pedagogical view that God provided each generation with opportunities to learn that he is the Creator of the world. The central part of God's educational plan, his *mdabbranuta*, was that he sent his Son to make his invisible power visible. Final salvation takes place at the end times when Christ returns. In the seventh century, the feeling of living at the end times was profoundly felt in Jewish, Christian and Islamic groupings and may even have formed a catalysing factor in the Arab conquests. Isho'yahb III strongly related the sufferings of his times to God's *mdabbranuta* and awaited the immanent end times, in which the Arabs played their God-given role. Isho'yahb III's and George I's emphasis on soteriology may have reflected an acutely felt desire to secure life thereafter. The Synod of George I, which was held in 676, further tried to adjust the divine laws to the difficult end times. The long account of God's *mdabbranuta* by the East Syrian monk John bar Penkaye, who described and interpreted events until c.686, is a continuation of the apocalyptic thoughts expressed by Isho'yahb III and George I.